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CIA Spouses Seeking Divorce Benefits

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"Barbara bore the heaviest burden of this dual life, knowing I was engaged in some mysterious work but not knowing precisely what it was, or how dangerous it might be. She accepted that intelligence work had secrets, and that these had to be kept, even from her." William Colby, CIA director from 1973 to 1976, in "Honorable Men, My Life in the CIA."

WASHINGTON — Because of their firsthand knowledge of the demands placed on spouses of CIA intelligence officers, William Colby and his wife, Barbara, have joined CIA spouses in demanding passage of legislation to entitle them to a share of their husbands' retirement benefits should they divorce.

"The basic thesis we have is the wife of a CIA officer helps the mission of the agency when she lives with him abroad. No matter what happens to a marriage later, that service is done. The proper percentage of her husband's retirement should be shared with her," Colby, now a prominent Washington lawyer, said in an interview.

The Senate Select Committee on Intelligence in May heard testimony from wives on their role in aiding their husbands abroad, as well as testimony by former intelligence officers opposed to any law requiring benefits be shared with a divorced spouse. The Colbys, married 37 years, both testified.

The "somewhat dramatic" hearings were closed, said Dan Finn, committee staff member, because "we were considering case histories. These would have divulged agents, both present and past. Some of the people who appeared couldn't be seen publicly in this capacity."

The bill, sponsored by Sens. Daniel Inouye, D-Hawaii, and Barry M. Goldwater, R-Ariz., who is chairman of the intelligence committee, was approved by the committee last week and will be considered on the Senate floor this year.

The Senate bill is almost identical to legislation passed in 1980 providing benefits for Foreign Service ex-spouses who had been married for a minimum of 10 years. The CIA bill also requires five years of overseas service.

CIA spouses, almost all women, found it "extremely difficult to get started" in their push for legislation, because they lacked any real organization, Finn said. The Association of American Foreign Service Women provided assistance in coordinating the drive for legislation.

Colby, who served overseas for 12 years as a CIA agent under the cover of being a foreign service officer, explained how a spouse often helps in covert activities.

"She helps maintain his cover. She'll sometimes walk with him so he isn't seen alone. If he's under the cover of an embassy officer, you have to pretend to be an embassy wife. If he represents the ABC Export Co., you have to pretend to be a businessman's wife."

"And you have to protect the security of his activities, the protection of his papers," Colby said. "We each have communications equipment and weapons, and they need to be kept from any servants you might have (common in most third world countries). Sometimes they have to carry messages or go on trips."

Barbara Colby feels that another reason spouses are entitled to an equal share of the benefits, even after a divorce, is that it is almost impossible for wives to maintain a regular job, because of constant traveling and commitments to the husband's career. "Teaching is about it," she said.

She said she has been amazed at the "extreme loyalty" most of the CIA wives have shown to the agency, even when going through a bitter divorce. Barbara Colby said some spouses are now asked to take a loyalty oath, but she never was.

"I was of that period when we (wives) did not know. There is a basic 'need to know' tenet in the CIA — 'if you don't need to know, you don't,'" she said. "All Bill could say to me a lot of the time is that he was going out and would be back later."

The CIA also will screen the prospective wife or husband of an agent planning marriage. "You must notify the CIA and they will

look into the background of your choice. There have been times when they have been told if they get married, they will lose their job," explained Robert Simmons, staff director of the intelligence committee and a former CIA officer.

Simmons said for a CIA family living abroad "it can be somewhat of a strenuous and unusual lifestyle. There are odd, late hours. Your spouse may have to go to a party or hang around a bar. There have been cases where they never do come back."

Simmons says he has seen many "classic" divorce cases in the CIA. The married couple "spends 35 years overseas, moving from country to country, never a stable place and home. And then at age 55 the CIA officer goes through a mid-life crisis, wants a divorce to marry his secretary. He collapses dead and everything goes to the secretary," nothing to the ex-spouse.

"This legislation gives the ex-spouse more support and provides some equities for the spouse who has provided contributions to the spouse's career," Simmons said.

"Divorce rates among CIA families are un-

usually high," Goldwater said when he introduced the bill in April.

Simmons said cables and communications from around the globe have been pouring into the committee from agents abroad about the bill, and negative comments far outnumber the positive ones.

"Those agency members who are divorced or contemplating it are going to fight it," explained Simmons. He also noted that many spouses of CIA employees abroad are probably unaware of pending legislation, contributing to the lopsided response.

Simmons is optimistic about passage of the bill this year, especially because of the precedent set by the Foreign Service Act of 1980, but added "anything involving men and women and divorce is going to present some problems."

The CIA itself has been barely lukewarm in its public support of the bill. "We are not opposed to it," said the CIA's spokesman Dale Peterson. "We're cooperating with Congress."

But one source, calling the CIA a "terribly chauvinistic outfit," said the agency has been fighting the bill "tooth and nail."

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